

Gila resolution calls freeway path 'sacred land'

by **Colleen Sparks** - Apr. 29, 2008 06:29 PM
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A resolution adopted a year ago by the Gila River Indian Community Council has thrown a wrench into the proposed South Mountain Freeway plan.

The council in April 2007 designated the South Mountain Range as "a sacred place/traditional cultural property" that must not be violated.

The council said any alteration of the range "for any purpose would be a violation of the cultural and religious beliefs of the Gila River Indian Community."

Phoenix Councilman Greg Stanton, who represents Ahwatukee Foothills, said he read the resolution for the first time Tuesday and that it is "critically important that we respect tribal sovereignty issues, that we respect the tribe's interpretation of sacred places and religiously important sites."

The freeway, if approved, would run along the Pecos Road alignment in Ahwatukee and cut through South Mountain Park. The cuts would range from 120 to 220 feet into the mountain, the Arizona Department of Transportation estimates.

"We as the community better think long and hard before we are willing to destroy a sacred place," Stanton said.

Tim Tait, ADOT community relations director, said Monday that issues of cultural sensitivity and sacredness will be talked about in a "general sense" in the environmental impact statement.

"There's a high level of confidentiality when we talk about . . . the concept of being sacred," said Tait, who also is part of the ADOT-led freeway study team. "There are specific areas that might have greater sensitivity than others. We have to help protect those."

Tait said ADOT is working with Gila officials "on the potential future establishment of a boundary."

No one at the Gila River Indian Community public information office returned calls seeking comment Tuesday.

The South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team is charged with recommending whether the freeway be built.

Freeway proponents say the proposed freeway would help alleviate Valley traffic congestion while opponents say it would negatively affect the environment, among other concerns.

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